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STANFORD UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
Department of Genetics

October 3, 1972

Dr. Alfred E. Mirsky
Rockefeller University
New York, New York 10021

Dear Alfred,

I am trying to collect a more accurate historical record, in part to clear up some of the confusion that Wyatt has introduced into an interesting part of the history of molecular and cell biology. I have gone into this in part in my enclosed note to Nature, but I think it may be important to enlarge on it and to try to collect more documentation from the original actors. You have probably seen the rather stupid way in which he has referred to your controversy about the purity of transforming DNA. (May I refresh your memory that I was quite sympathetic to those criticisms in principle, and certainly our goading did nothing to impede the actual progress of work in that field).

I first learned about Avery's work from Harriett Taylor in January 1945, and indeed this impelled me to propose some experiments to Francis Ryan, the further outcome of which I think you know very well. I am interested now in trying to elucidate how Harriett and others at Columbia first became acquainted with Avery's work, presumably just prior to or at about the time of his publication in early 1944. Dobzhansky had of course referred to the overall problem of pneumococcus transformation in his book "Genetics and the Origin of Species" bringing the story up to a point before the active material had been identified as DNA. I have written to Doby to try to clarify the level and nature of his own personal contacts with Avery through that interval. Since, as I recall, you were in very close contact with the Department of Zoology in the early 1940's it seems plausible that you may have yourself been an important vehicle for informing the geneticists there about this work and its significance, and I wonder if you can corroborate that. I would be particularly interested in any precise information that you may have about how Francis Ryan and Harriett Taylor became acquainted with this work and how Harriett first made direct contact with Avery, with the eventual result, of course, of her working with him.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics

JL/rr